



Todd Otis, director of community partnership for Think Small

Interview with The Civic Caucus

8301 Creekside Circle #920, Bloomington, MN 55437

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Notes of the Discussion

Present : Jon Bacal, David Broden (phone), Rick Campion, Pat Davies, Paul Gilje, Jim Hetland (phone), Annabelle Joyce, Sallie Kemper, Johnson, Tim McDonald, Clarence Shallbetter

Summary of discussion - Todd Otis, director of community partnerships for Think Small, describes the history of early learning advocacy in Minnesota and the opportunities for economic and social gains for the state that could result from an increase in investment in quality early learning programs. He discusses initiatives presently under way in the administration of Governor Dayton and prospects for more state investment in pre-kindergarten education.

A. Introduction of speaker - Todd Otis is director of community partnerships for Think Small, an early learning advocacy organization based in the Twin Cities. After graduating from Harvard College in 1967, Otis joined the Peace Corps and served in Senegal for two years. In 1970, he received an MS degree in journalism from Columbia University. He worked in corporate community relations and later served in the Minnesota House of Representatives from 1979 to 1990. He was DFL Party Chair from 1990 to 1993 and then worked as a public affairs consultant on early childhood and environmental issues. He served as President for Ready-4-K, an early education advocacy group, from 2001 until its merger with Think Small in 2012.

B. Discussion

Background.

In 1998 a privately funded commission was formed to examine childcare financing, co-chaired by former Minneapolis Mayor Don Fraser and Rochester businessman Bob Cady. The Commission met for two years and included leaders from the private and public sector. It quickly broadened the range of issues beyond childcare to include many facets of school readiness and organizations that impact it. Among the commission's recommendations was the creation of a Ready 4 K campaign to build public support of early learning. Ready 4 K was incorporated in June 2001 to build public awareness, enlist support from the business community, organize the early childhood community and promote

public policy to improve school readiness in Minnesota. One of the most strategically important steps Ready 4 K took was to recruit Dr. Art Rolnick of the 9th Federal Reserve District to its Board. Dr. Rolnick expressed reluctance at first, but when shown the longitudinal studies of the effectiveness of quality early learning on low-income children, and the benefits to their future, he joined the Board.

In 2003, Dr. Rolnick and his colleague at the Federal Reserve, Rob Grunewald, published an important study showing that investments in high-quality early education yield a high public return in terms of lower educational costs, crime rates, and social service expenses. Rolnick and Grunewald translated the data into return on investment language, which resonated with business leaders in a powerful way. Minnesota business leaders subsequently formed Minnesota Business for Early Learning to develop a strategy for investing wisely in early childhood education. The work of this group eventually led to the establishment of the Minnesota Early Learning Foundation (MELF) in 2005. Duane Benson led the formation of the Early Learning Foundation.

The Minnesota Early Learning Foundation developed a market-based strategy for a public early learning program. Civic Caucus notes of an interview with Laurie Davis describing the strategy may be found online at: <http://tinyurl.com/8yxzkcn> .

THE PROBLEM: Large numbers of children are not prepared for kindergarten.

The Minnesota School Readiness Study, produced annually by the Minnesota Department of Education, is an accepted means of assessment for school readiness, Otis said. It is based on the observations of entering kindergartners by trained kindergarten teachers in five domains of child development. That study is the basis for the statement that only about one half of entering kindergartners in Minnesota are fully prepared for school success. Otis noted that such low numbers on this assessment creates a weak foundation for later school success.

The link between school readiness and subsequent performance was clearly demonstrated by a study conducted by Dr. Arthur Reynolds of the Humphrey Institute. He showed that children not kindergarten-ready in the domain of language and literacy were twice as likely to fail the 3rd grade literacy assessment as children who were proficient in language and literacy entering kindergarten. Not-ready children were also twice as likely to require special education compared to children who had been assessed as "proficient."

There is a financial cost as well: The Wilder Foundation estimated that the K-12 system is forced to spend \$112 million more than it would if all children were ready for kindergarten.

Quality settings really matter to assure school readiness, Otis said. He cited a Minnesota Department of Human Services study of accredited childcare centers that showed much better school readiness results than the statewide MDE annual sampling. The greatest return on investment is for low-income children in quality settings, which would indicate that providing access to quality early learning should be a much higher public priority than it currently is. Even children from very economically challenged families can excel, if they are exposed to quality early learning.

THE GOAL: Policy should aim to prepare all young people for school.

Ultimately, Otis said, the goal of Think Small is to significantly increase access to quality early learning for young children throughout Minnesota. He added that early learning should be viewed in the context of a continuum with K-12 up through post-secondary education. Each stage builds on the previous one: quality early learning will improve K-12 education and beyond.

There are many different views on how quality education can and should be offered, he said, both at home and in centers. But the unifying theme is that quality pre-K education is key to K-12 success.

THE STRATEGY: Increase the number of high-quality early learning providers.

Otis said that in 2009, Ready 4 K brought together the groups that lobby for pre-K education, and asked: If the Governor and legislature asked for a plan to improve school readiness, what would those groups tell the governor to do? (This was during the run-up to the 2010 Gubernatorial election.) The group that represented Head Start, home visiting, parent education and child care came up with the "Minnesota's Future" agenda that includes five elements:

1. Improving access to parent education and home visiting
2. Doubling low income children's access to quality pre-K programs
3. Implementing a statewide quality rating system ("Parent Aware")
4. Forming community partnerships to improve school readiness
5. Advocating for a cabinet level position for early learning

During the past year serious progress has been made on two of these agenda items: expansion of the Parent Aware quality improvement and rating system and the creation of the Office of Early Learning

Ratings: Gather and publish information on provider quality.

One of the most important concepts put forward by the early childhood community and MELF is the creation of an early learning quality rating system, Otis said. Parents and guardians ought to know which early care and education providers are of high quality, be they child care, Head Start, or school-based programs, so those parents can make better informed choices on behalf of their young children.

By providing information and incentives for people to choose quality providers, a quality improvement and rating system like Parent Aware empowers parents. By 2015, Parent Aware will be expanded statewide, and that will raise the quality of early learning throughout Minnesota.

Cabinet level attention: Legislative blocks offset in part by Governor's support.

There was opposition to a quality rating system by a small but powerful group of people in the Legislature who appear to believe this kind of effort is a movement in the direction of government raising children, a seriously mistaken view in Otis' mind. Parent Aware only enlarges the importance and power of parents; in no way does it diminish that power, he added.

However, the state's successful application for federal "Race to the Top" funding provided a new opening for the early learning programming that did not make it through the legislature. Of the state's \$45 million "Race to the Top" grant, some will be used to build up the ratings system, some will be

used for data sharing and some will go toward scholarships for children to attend high-quality pre-K schools.

The Race to the Top elements constitute the beginning of a coherent and effective early childhood system in Minnesota. The application process that resulted in winning Race to the Top funds was an important means of garnering Governor Dayton's full appreciation of the issue and to his committing to put the key building blocks in place.

Early learning is one percent of the state budget; double it.

It would cost somewhere around 250 million new dollars per year to fund a robust early learning program, Otis contends. The Start Early Funders group that includes a number of Minnesota-based foundations agrees with that estimate. (By way of context, The Itasca Project looked at the costs of providing quality child care for all 3 and 4 year-olds and estimated to do so would cost an additional \$1 billion.)

"We've got one percent of the state budget going to early learning right now; if we are going to make major strides in school readiness we need to at least double it," Otis said. But the money must go to quality programs.

He said the money could come from rethinking the state's priorities, possibly by adopting a "budgeting for outcomes" strategy, with the state allocating funds based on their expected return. It could also come as part of an increase in revenue; if Minnesota returned to the cost of government numbers in effect during Governor Carlson's administration there would be a significant and appropriate increase in revenue.

Otis added that based on polling, people are willing to pay more taxes if they knew the increase were going to the high-return investment in early learning.

A participant questioned whether funding already earmarked for early childhood, such as the Head Start program, could be redirected to programs with high quality ratings. Otis answered that in the case of Head Start it already qualifies because it is high quality, and that the program is already underfunded. "My problem with redirecting Head Start money is if you're going to spend more why cannibalize within the 1 percent of state spending already authorized for early childhood? Why not find areas of less efficiency and lower return elsewhere in the budget?"

Silos

Currently early care and education is fragmented; children can be cared for by staying home with a parent; by informal arrangements with family, friends, or neighbors; in child care centers; by Head Start; or in a school-based program. The creation of a common standard of quality can help assure that no matter what program or silo a child is in, he or she will have the best possible start. It is also imperative to improve the linkages between early care and education and the K-12 system. One model that was proven successful in Chicago is the Chicago Parent Center model, that combines age three to grade three, a concept that Minnesota has recently been funded to expand in our state. Barriers to such integration should be taken down and flexibility should be built into the system.

Ideally we are creating a system that is best for the children, not just convenient for institutions, Otis said.

C. Closing

The benefits of preparing children to succeed in school, Otis noted, will accrue to all children, even to those who already come "ready for K" without further assistance. If all children are ready, teachers will not be forced to spend remediation time on those students who are not adequately prepared. And the benefits to the state's K-12 education, and thus the future economy, are extraordinary, if we lay a solid foundation in early education.

"I find the biggest hurdle is inertia, the lack of political will, but I see that changing under Governor Dayton and his administration. The Governor and his key Commissioners really seem committed to this issue." The trick is to create a system that will last, that will survive any one particular administration, he added.

The chair thanked Mr. Otis for the very informative visit.